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Mead

The Brew Of The Gods!

Lewis Stead

Mead is the oldest alcoholic drink known to mankind. More recently it has been taken up in the Pagan and other "alternative" communities such as the SCA as a favorite for years. It's a form of wine made with a honey instead of grape juice. Mead is most often associated with the Vikings and in the Pagan community with modern day Norse Paganism or Asatru.

Mead is an important part of the Asatru religion and has a place in both of the major Norse rituals: the blot and the sumble. The sumble is a drinking ritual where stories, oaths, and poetry are shared and mead's function here is obvious. In this day and age mead is even more important to the blot or sacrifice ritual. The blot is actually quite simple. A God or Goddess is called upon and a sacrifice is poured in their honor. In ancient times this was most often an animal sacrifice and blood was poured out onto the ground or altar. Today an alcoholic beverage of some kind is the usual sacrifice. This is not only an adjustment to modern feelings about animal sacrifice, but is appropriate from an esoteric point of view as well. In ancient times the Norsemen were primarily farmers and an animal would have been a product that they had raised. Also, sacrifices were not a wasting of the animal, merely given to the Gods and left to rot, but were usually feasts where the Gods got their portion and the humans their own. Today mead making has been a frenzied activity among Norse Pagans, and it is most appropriate that something be sacrificed to the Gods which has been made by your own hands in a sacred manner. Mead fits the bill. It has the immediate links to our farming ancestors, but it can be easily made from household items in even a small apartment.

While we really don't know a great deal about how the ancients viewed mead, other than as an intoxicant, we do have a few clues. One interesting item to start with is that mead was apparently sometimes strained through rye, which contains the hallucinogenic chemical ergot. This may offer some insights into Seidhr, a Nordic shamanic practice, and the frenzy of the berserkers. Another interesting item is that Frey, a God of farming and harvest, was said to have two close companions, Bygvir and Beyla. Bygvir was the spirit of the barley and Beyla of the honey - both important Gods to brewers and appropriate companions for the God of fertility.

Finally, we have a few myths involving mead directly. Mead was known as Kvasir's blood and it's primary association was with wisdom. Kvasir was a being who was the wisest in all the universe, but he was killed and a mead created out of his blood that when drank brought the drinker wisdom. Aegir, a God of the Sea, was held to be the patron of brewing and the finest of mead and ale for the Gods to drink in Valhalla. Odin is said to never eat, but to exist purely on mead, just as the Greek Gods had their nectar.

Even if it were not for any mythological importance, mead is of interest to the modern brewer because it is easy to produce and delicious. One merely introduces a yeast to the sugary liquid, and the yeast converts the natural sugars into alcohol. After all the sugar is converted, the yeast dies off and the wine can be bottled. However, this is not always as easy as it sounds.

The largest problem in brewing is keeping inappropriate yeasts out of the drink. While the correct wine (or beer) yeasts eat sugar and excrete alcohol, other yeasts produce vinegar instead. Because of this it is absolutely vital to keep all brewing equipment absolutely sterile. This is the most important thing you can do in brewing. All the great equipment purchased as your wine making shop and the finest ingredients cannot beat a glass jar filled with welfare honey if the former is contaminated and the latter sterile. There are two major ways to sterilize your materials, one is a commercial "sanitizer" found in wine making shops. Follow label directions and you're all set. The other is to make a solution of 25% bleach and rinse very thoroughly.

Let's make some cheap and easy mead. You'll need a large pot, a one gallon vinegar or cider bottle, a 4' or 5' length of plastic tubing (try airline tubing from a pet shop), a balloon or non-lubricated condom, a package of wine yeast (not bread yeast), wine bottles, corks, a corking device, and 2 1/2 pounds of honey.

First you need to prepare the mixture that will be fermented. Take your pot and add the honey and enough water to finish filling up the one gallon bottle. Bring these to a boil slowly. If you don't want scum in your mead and it forms on the top, skim it off. You don't need to boil it for any length of time, you just need to bring it up to this temperature. Boiling for a while will release a lot of scum and additives which you can get rid of right now and it will also allow the mead to age more quickly. However, some of this 'scum' as I've called it is made up of those very things which can create flavor nuances. I don't boil mine. When you decide it's done, let it cool long enough so it won't melt the plastic tubing, then siphon the mead into the gallon jug , cap and let cool overnight. The gallon jug is your primary fermenter.

Did you sterilize the pot? the bottle? the cap? the plastic tubing? No! Pour it out and start again 'yes I am serious.

Once the mixture is cooled to room temperature you will need to pitch the yeast. Get a small cup half full with warm, but not hot, water and add the yeast. Let it sit for about ten minutes and absorb water and liven up, then pour it into your gallon jug and mix it in.

As of now your honey and water mixture is now being converted into mead. However, this will take about two weeks, perhaps more, to complete. During this time the mead mixture will bubble and foam, and this is what the balloon is for. Cover the top of the bottle with the balloon and about an hour later, when the balloon has started to inflate but has not become too stretched, poke a few holes in it with a pin. (I understand this may make you wince if you are using a condom.) This balloon takes the place of a fermentation lock and allows the gas to escape while not allowing air in, thus keeping the fermentation bottle sterile. The holes may become clogged with foam and you may need to poke a few more. Just remember the purpose of this and use your common sense. I've accomplished this with plastic wrap and a rubber band, but I wouldn't advise others to try unless you're fond of unmet expectations.

About two weeks from this point the balloon will cease to be greatly inflated and will eventually go limp. When it has been completely limp for a few days and the mead is clear rather than cloudy, fermentation is over. At this point sanitize your wine bottles and plastic tubing and bottle the mead. Be careful not to get the yeast into the bottles as it's not exactly tasty stuff. I stop about an inch before the bottom of the primary fermenter and we siphon off the

last inch into cups and toast the new mead. My mead has been very tasty at this point, other people describe theirs as tasting like paint thinner. In any case, you may not mind a little yeast in your cup now, but don't inflict it on yourself in the future by bottling it.

Wait two to six months and then enjoy. Since the above recipe has no additives which would hasten aging, it may take a while for it to become truly fine mead, perhaps years. There are a lot of chemical additives that one can use to improve the flavor and process. The most common and important addition is a teaspoon of yeast energizer or yeast nutrient. Others include grape tannin (1/4 teaspoon), malic acid (2 or 3 teaspoons), tartaric acid (1 to 2 teaspoons). I recommend all of these chemical additives in your first batch, but if you can't find them you can make do with natural ingredients or nothing at all.

One can also add slices of fruit, raisins, or berries for flavor and in place of grape tannin. One recipe I know of adds some apple jelly. A few lemon peels will substitute for malic acid and a spoonful of strong tea will do replace tartaric acid. Hops are a common additive and will give the mead a bit of a bitterness to offset the sweetness of the honey. The more bizarre ingredient I have heard of was Szechuan peppers, use your imagination.

All of the above additives should be made to the honey and water mix when it is boiled. Depending on the ingredient, some, such as fruit, may have to be boiled in this mixture for a while to break them down. Obviously hunks of fruit should be strained out after the boiling. Also, all the above ingredients are based on 1 gallon of mead, adjust appropriately with the exception of the yeast itself, one package of which will do for anywhere between 1 and 5 gallons.

Another semi-useful item is sulfite tablets which can be added to the mead mixture a day before bottling. This will kill all remaining yeast and will assure that you are not contaminated by vinegar yeast after bottling or worse that the fermentation process does not continue in the bottle, causing it to explode or pop its cork. I don't use sulfite and I've heard negative comments about a sulfurous aftertaste. It's probably the better part of valor to simply wait a while longer and make sure the fermentation process is truly ended.

The above instructions also assume you are not interested in spending a great deal of money on equipment. The only things you really must obtain from a wine making store are the yeast, the corks, and the corker.

If you are willing to spend $50 to $100 more you can improve your chances of making a good mead by purchasing equipment made for the purpose. A balloon works, but it is a poor substitute for a proper fermentation lock that is custom fit to a vat built for the purpose. Likewise there are many other devices which will useful.

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